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ABSTRACT

In this age of proliferating visual communications, there is a permissiveness in subject matter, content, and meaning that is exhilarating, yet overwhelming to interpret in a meaningful or consensual way. By recognizing visual statements, whether a piece of sculpture, an advertisement, a video, or a building, as communication, one can approach their interpretation on different levels and in a number of different ways. The central thesis of this paper is that a visually literate approach to interpreting visual statements must be a flexible, context-relevant, ongoing reinterpretation, and reevaluation. Hence, visual literates have an obligation to explore a variety of perspectives such as art historical, mass communications, perception psychology, semiotics, and hermeneutics. There is a diagram that illustrates the systems for interpretation in communication theory is provided, as well as two lists that outline the various perspectives and categories of an eclectic, inclusive interpretation process. (Contains 35 references.) (DGM)

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From Iconic to Lingual: Interpreting Visual Statements

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In an age of proliferating visual communication we face a permissiveness in subject matter, content and meaning that is exhilarating, yet overwhelming to interpret in any meaningful or consensual way. By recognizing visual statements—whether a piece of sculpture, an advertisement, a video, or a building—as communication, we can approach their interpretation on different levels and in a number of different ways. In support of my central thesis—that a visually literate approach to interpreting visual statements must be a flexible, context-relevant, ongoing reinterpretation and reevaluation—we, as visual literates, have an obligation to explore a variety of perspectives: art historical, mass communications, perception psychology, semiotics, hermeneutics, etc

At IVLA '93 I presented a summary of art historical approaches: pre-modern/connoisseurial, modern/structuralist and post-modern/deconstructionist/social.[1] In this, the second of a minimum of three papers that I envision to overview these multiple perspectives, I intended to investigate and summarize how mass communications theorists and perceptual psychologists navigate the transition from the iconic to the lingual to illuminate interpretation of visuals.

Upon undertaking this challenge, however, I bogged down in an overwhelming body of material. What business do I, a visual artist, have in taking the time from my work to become more than cursorily informed? I want interpretation of visuals to be vital, exciting, joyful. Would attempting a synopsis of this vast realm contribute anything, or burden the interpretation process?

While I mulled these questions, I turned to see what people in mass communications have to say about interpretation. Initially, I found little, and most relied upon cognitive psychology. Considering my limited proclivities, cognitive theory threatened to cast more shadow than light on my quest. When I consider that the leap from iconic to lingual has been a central part of my professional life for more than 30 years, the last thing I wanted is for the dynamic process to become engulfed by concepts and theory.

Pressed to have something to offer at the conference, I remembered a presentation at the 1993 International Visual Literacy Symposium on Verbo-Visual Literacy in Delphi, Greece. Professor James Anderson, Chair, Department of Communications at the University of Utah, addressed interpretation in communication theory. The proceedings of the conference were still in production, so I had not seen his paper, but I remembered his quickly dashed on the chalk board diagram. It depicted the historical development of the topic from early theorists to the present.[2] From a sketch of his sketch, I prepared the diagram which, having passed his review, is reproduced herewith. It schematically represents the development of physical, perceptual, constructionist and hermeneutic theories, and illuminates the complexity of the issues and process. While Anderson makes no distinction for visual rather than verbal communications, I refer the reader to his article for a synopsis of multiple theories.[3]

Probably no one can arrive at a concise, definitive statement about how we navigate

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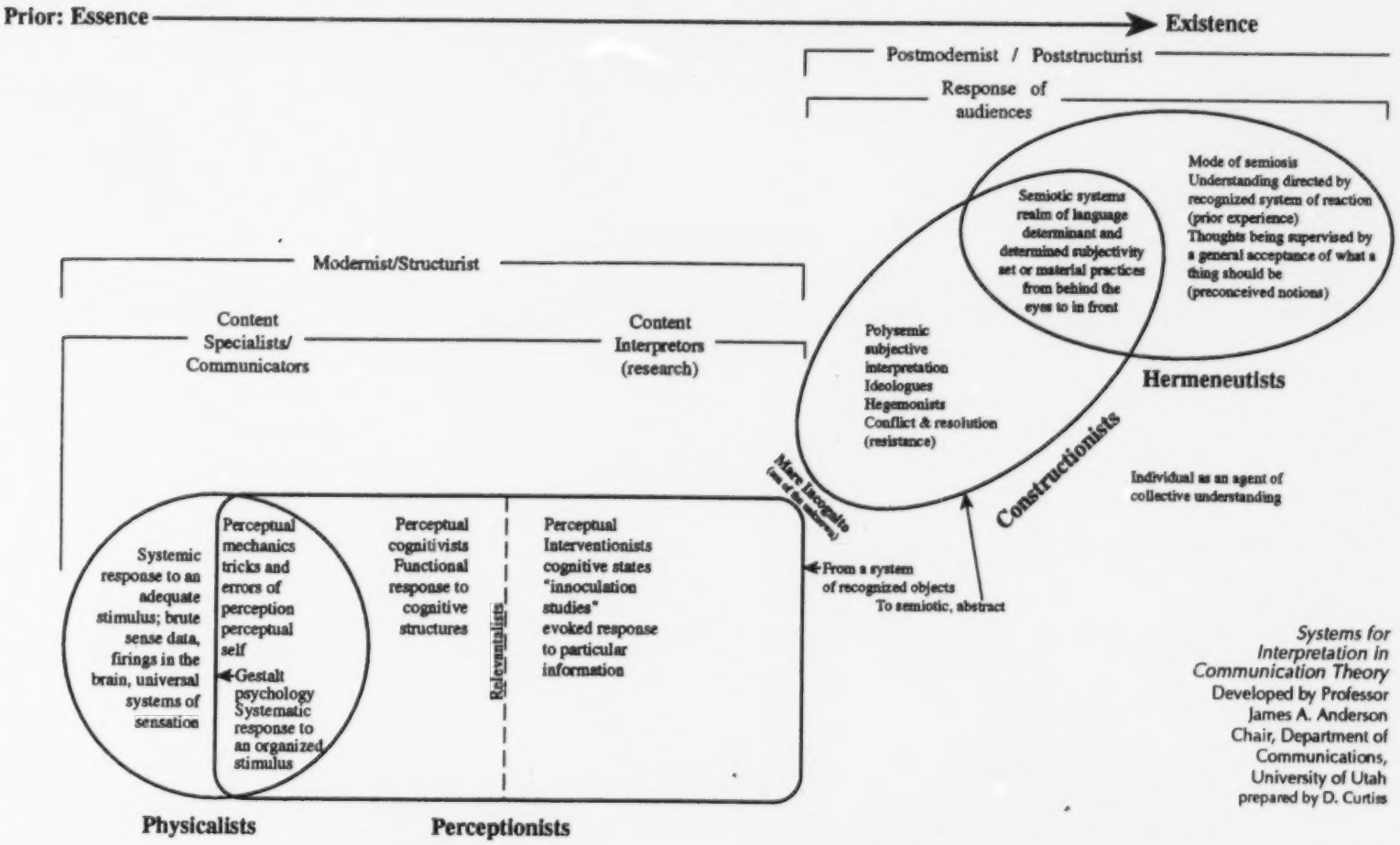
Prior: Essence
Existence
Postmodernist / Poststructurist
Response of audiences
Modernist/Structurist
Content Specialists/ Communicators
Content Interpretors (research)
Semiotic systems realm of language determinant and determined subjectivity set or material practices from behind the eyes to in front
Mode of semiosis
Understanding directed by recognized system of reaction (prior experience)
Thoughts being supervised by a general acceptance of what a thing should be (preconceived notions)
Polysemic subjective interpretation
Ideologues
Hegemonists
Conflict & resolution (resistance)
Hermeneutists
Constructionists
Individual as an agent of collective understanding
More Incorrigible
Systemic response to an adequate stimulus; brute sense data, firings in the brain, universal systems of sensation
Perceptual mechanics tricks and errors of perception perceptual self
Gestalt psychology
Systematic response to an organized stimulus
Perceptual cognitivists
Punctional response to cognitive structures
Relevantialists
Perceptual Interventionists
cognitive states
"innoculation studies"
evoked response to particular information
From a system of recognized objects
To semiotic, abstract
Physicalists
Perceptionists

Systems for Interpretation in Communication Theory
Developed by Professor James A. Anderson
Chair, Department of Communications, University of Utah
prepared by D. Curtiss

Semiotic Focus:	**Sign as representation**		**Semiotic object**	**Relationship**
Interpretation:	**Factual**	**Evocative**	**Invocative**	**Achieved**
Individual:	**Attribute**		**Conjunctive**	**Activated**

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the transition from visual to verbal, a process that can simultaneously feel like a yawning chasm and a dense thicket. Interpretation of visuals and visual experience is, however, an issue that we must address, attempt, and encourage our students and colleagues to think and talk about. As we become knowledgeable about different perspectives, we need not chose one perspective over another, but can achieve a synthesis of multiple approaches that enrich our experience with the visuals we chose to come to know and understand.

Toward that objective, I offer two lists that outline the various perspectives and categories of an eclectic, inclusive interpretation process. In the first, the basic relationships between images and language is indicated.

Perspectives of Interpretation of Visuals

Art history iconic↔lingual
- pre-modern: connoisseurial/traditional
- modern: structuralist/formalist
- post-modern: deconstructionist/ social

Perception psychology a-iconic/lingual
- identifying, naming, labeling images
- representation-dependent
- related to consensual reality
- phenomenological/theoretical

Communications theory
- cognitive psychology iconic↔lingual
  - recognition to understanding
  - cognitive, social content/context
- semiotics iconic→lingual
- hermeneutics iconic→lingual
  - explanation, active process

Literary
- applications of literary theory/criticism to visuals lingual→iconic

Epistemology ›↔‹

Coming to understand the communicative aspects of visuals entails interpreting the content as it is meaningful to the viewer. This requires that the viewer/interpreter recognize the validity of her/his own experience, thinking and views. It can encompass the intent of the creator, if known, but knowledge of that intent cannot be considered essential to the interpretation or interpretation process. Many assume interpretation also implies evaluation, passing a value judgment on the worth of a visual. This too is only a possible component, not a requirement. Feinstein suggests that evaluation is a *natural* part of the interpretation process, and includes it among categories of interpretation of visuals.[4]

While I have expanded upon Feinstein's categories slightly, I acknowledge her contribution to the following outline.

Categories of Interpretation of Visuals

Description
- labeling, a general inventory of what is seen
- representation-dependent
- may lead to a literal, consensual reality-grounded interpretation
- cognitive, factual

Structure
- analysis to determine how the image was composed or constructed
- how the medium and underlying structure support or undermine the strength of the visual

Historical
- takes into account influences, context, environment and/or situation

Social/political
- relates to contemporary context
- protest, elucidation, persuasion

Metaphor
- subtle, indirect content that may be anagogic, poetic, inspirational, spiritual

Evaluation
- how a visual compares with known or held values, preference/bias, prevailing standards
- how it functions in social context, succeeds in achieving identified standards, esthetics.

"Interpretation is an emerging process not an instant. Its activity certainly subsides but need never end."[5] "...images are prone to...distortions from 'reality.'...We extract (and create) meaning from visual stimuli just as we do from text."[6] "We must learn to interpret visual messages in a meaningful way; if passive, we lose control over information which impacts our lives...making meaning is a creative, constructive process."[7]

"Images do not make meanings. Social action changes the way groups experience the world, and therefore, the way they make sense of the world. Social actors make meanings and change meanings. All learners are social actors and the invitations they accept or reject have consequences for themselves and other social actors. What often appears to be a simple 'decoding' of media is really a complex process that involves the acceptance of one set of invitations to construct particular meanings and the rejection of alternatives."[8]

Inspired by these quotations, I conclude that the interpretation of visuals is a rich and rewarding multilevel process in which one will often arrive somewhere that is impossible to anticipate. Like any journey to an exotic place, the effort is its own reward.

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[1] Curtiss, D. (1994) An Eclectic Approach to the Interpretation of Visual Statements. *Visual Literacy in the Digital Age*, J. Clark-Baca, D. G. Beauchamp & R. A. Braden, eds.

[2] Anderson, J. A. (1994) The Role of Interpretation in Communication Theory. *Verbo-Visual Literacy: Understanding and Applying New Educational Communication Media Technologies*, Metallinos, N., ed. Concordia University, Montreal.

[3] Anderson, op. cit.

[4] Feinstein, H. (1993) Visual Literacy in General Education at the University of Cincinnati. *Journal of Visual Literacy* 13:2.

[5] Anderson, op. cit., p. 220.

[6] Miller, H. B. and Burton, J. K. (1994). Images and Imagery Theory. In D. M. Moore and F. M. Dwyer (Eds.), *Visual Literacy, a Spectrum of Visual Learning*, p. 77. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

[7] Couch, R. A. and Caropresso, E.J. with Miller, H. B. (1994). Making Meaning from Visuals: Creative Thinking and Interpretation of Visual Information. In D. M. Moore and F. M. Dwyer (Eds.), *Visual Literacy, a Spectrum of Visual Learning*, p. 278. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

[8] Ellsworth, E. (1988). Media Interpretation As a Social and Political Act, *Journal of Visual Literacy* 8:2, p. 36.

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